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Soviets Improving Nuclear Arsenal. CIA Official Warns

(By DON SHANNON, Times Staff Writer)

WASHINGTON—Amid Democratic protests that the Reagan Administration was using the CIA to promote public support for increased defense spending, two high-ranking intelligence officials told a Senate subcommittee Wednesday that the Soviet Union is modernizing and strengthening its entire strategic nuclear arsenal.

"By the mid-1990s, nearly all of the Soviets' currently deployed intercontinental nuclear attack forces—land- and sea-based ballistic missiles and heavy bombers—will be replaced by new and improved systems," the officials told the Senate Appropriations defense subcommittee.

In a rare public appearance, Robert M. Gates, deputy director of the CIA, and Lawrence K. Gershwin, an expert in Soviet strategic weapons, said that the Soviets will improve their ability to destroy hardened U.S. missile silos and will improve the quality of their submarine- and bomber-launched missiles.

Soviets Make 'Major Strides'

They said that the Soviets have "made major strides in preparing for the deployment" of two new mobile, land-based intercontinental missiles—the SS-X-24, which is deployed by rail, and the SS-X-25, which is deployed by road. They said that the SS-X-25 will be operational late this year and the SS-X-24 in 1987.

The Soviets, who now have about 9,000 intercontinental nuclear warheads, have the "capability" of increasing that total to 21,000 by the mid-1990s, Gates and Gershwin said. But that would violate the SALT II treaty, and the intelligence officials said the Soviets have remained within that treaty's limits thus far.

The two officials emphasized that the Soviets are continuing to work on elements of an anti-ballistic missile system resembling the U.S. "Star Wars" program, still in the research stage, to provide a shield against incoming nuclear missiles.

Although both Gates and Gershwin repeatedly rejected senators' requests to say whether the Soviets are ahead of the United States in any field, Democratic Sens. William Proxmire of Wisconsin and Gary Hart of Colorado accused the Republicans who control the committee of staging the testimony to bolster White House requests for higher defense appropriations.

"Your appearance here seems to be more political than anything else," Proxmire told Gates after the official had said that CIA estimates of the annual growth in Soviet military spending, earlier put at 2%, have risen to between 3% and 4% in the last few years. Hart warned of the "danger, when, from the left or the right, you begin to make ideological what ought to be totally professional."

Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.) replied that senators from both parties had asked for the public briefing. "The alternative is leaks," Warner said.

"I won't address the motives of the White House," Gates said. "This briefing has been given on a classified basis, and we were asked by the White House if we could provide an unclassified presentation."

Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio) seized on the officials' reports that the Soviet Union is emphasizing mobile missiles to criticize the Administration's plans for deploying MX missiles in hardened Minuteman silos. "We're in the same old hole," Glenn said.

Although the intelligence officials did not directly reply, Gershwin acknowledged that fixed targets will be "in trouble" as Soviet missiles gain in accuracy.

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